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ABSTRACT

Lessons learned by five small, private colleges about meeting the challenges facing higher education are described. Each of the colleges developed a unique educational program emphasizing the liberal arts that responds to current challenges. Each school has experienced increased enrollments and retention, growth in endowments and plants, larger alumni giving and foundation support, and enhanced quality in academic programs. The presidents of the colleges were brought together to see if there were common threads in their institutional experiences and whether what they learned might be useful to other colleges. The following are the colleges and their presidents: Alverno College (Joel Read), Bard College (Leon Botstein), Birmingham-Southern College (Neal Berte), Bradford College (Arthur Levine), and Scripps College (John Chandler). After the presidents' meeting, their conclusions were shared in a symposium with 25 outstanding American educators, scholars, journalists, and business and association officials. The lessons can be summarized as follows: (1) the present is a time of opportunity for American colleges; (2) sound management is essential for colleges today, but it is not enough; (3) focusing on education is the best remedy for the challenges facing colleges and universities today; (4) colleges can prosper by embracing the liberal arts; and (5) colleges of all types have the ability to succeed today. The institutional mission of each college is reported in an appendix. (SW)

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# OPPORTUNITY FOR EXCELLENCE

## The Lessons Learned by Five Colleges

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March, 1985

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This statement was made possible by the Ford Foundation. It benefits from the thinking of a great many people. It is a product of an extended conversation between five college presidents—Joel Read (Alverno), Leon Botstein (Bard), Neal Berte (Birmingham-Southern), Arthur Levine (Bradford), and John Chandler (Scripps). It is also the result of a symposium bringing together more than two dozen leading American educators.

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Tougaloo College

William Boyd
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Martha Church
President
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Reporter
Boston Globe

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President
Whitman College

Donald Stewart
President
Spelman College

In short, this statement reflects the wisdom of many, but the shortcomings are only those of the authors. Finally, the authors wish to express their thanks to Mrs. Wilmot H. Kidd, Presid[illegible] of the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, and Dr. John E. Sawyer, President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, for their thoughtful comments on the draft report; Dr. Alison Bernstein, educational program officer of the Ford Fundation, whose support made this statement possible; and David Haselkorn, assistant to the president at Bradford College, who served as coordinator for the Ford Foundation project and assisted in the preparation of this report.

# INTRODUCTION

This is a report to the higher education community about opportunity and promise. It's a statement from the field—written by college presidents and intended for college faculties, administrators, and boards of trustees. It is an account of the lessons learned by five colleges about meeting the challenges facing higher education today.

The five schools are remarkably different institutions—Alverno (Wisconsin), Bard (New York), Birmingham-Southern (Alabama), Bradford (Massachusetts), and Scripps, (California). They are dispersed geographically throughout the United States. Several are in regions of economic hardship or demographic downturn; others are in growth areas. They are located in very different environments—cities, towns, and countryside. Their enrollments vary by a factor of four. Their student bodies are regional and national, female and coed, old and young, residential and commuter. Their curricula are dramatically different. These institutions run the gamut from almost 200 years of collegiate history to fewer than fifty. They are church related and nonsectarian. Some give graduate degrees, others do not.

What the five colleges share in common are four characteristics:

1) Each is a small private college without unusual resources.
2) Each is facing the same challenges as the rest of American higher education—demography, finances, and a panoply of changing social, political, and economic realities.
3) Each developed a unique and distinctive educational program emphasizing the liberal arts that responds to those challenges.

4) As a result, each is doing well. All are stronger and more vibrant than they were a few years ago.

- applicant pools have grown
- enrollments have increased
- retention has risen
- endowment and plant have grown
- alumni giving has increased
- foundation support has multiplied
- fiscal conditions have become stronger
- above all, academic programs and quality have been greatly enhanced

In this sense, the five colleges are success stories. They are by no means unique. There are colleges all over the United States which have experienced similar, even greater successes. The five merely represent a portion of the diversity of such colleges.

With Ford Foundation support, the presidents of the five colleges were brought together to see if there were common threads in their institutional experiences, to see whether there were lessons they had learned which might be useful to other colleges.

They spent three days together—talking, drafting, debating, agreeing, and disagreeing. They reached some conclusions. They shared these in a symposium with twenty-five outstanding American educators, scholars, journalists, foundation and corporate officers, association heads, and college and university leaders.

What emerged from the conversation were [illegible] lessons:

LESSON 1

## The present is a time of opportunity for American colleges.

We are not polyannas. Times are hard for higher education today. But historically hard times have had a very special impact on colleges and universities.

They have produced some of higher education's greatest success stories. The 1840s and 1850s, an era of declining enrollments and diminishing resources not unlike the present, brought forth bold and excellent new programs that made the names of institutions as varied as Brown, Michigan, Vermont, and Union. These colleges brought new subjects into the curriculum, such as natural science and modern language. They dispensed with outdated modes of instruction. They introduced innovations such as laboratory and seminar classes. They blended the traditions of higher education with the newly emerging needs of the nation. The depression saw precisely the same phenomenon at institutions such as the University of Chicago with its renowned college and St. John's in Annapolis with its great books program.

These institutions attracted students when their numbers were few. They obtained support when resources were shrinking. They became prominent when education was diminishing as a national priority.

Opportunity is implicit in adversity. Good times have meant business as usual for higher education, continued growth accomplished largely by adding the new to what already exists.

In contrast, hard times necessitate reappraisal. They have forced some institutions to develop new visions to

guide their futures. In the past, there have been times when hard pressed colleges with new and thoughtful approaches to education have thrived. Hard times offer that promise again today.

During the symposium, Jol n Maguire, president of the Claremont University Center, made a telling observation. He described a shift in the focus of higher education. Not long ago conversation in the profession stressed survival—a doom and gloom mentality concerned largely with keeping colleges alive. Today that emphasis has waned. In its place, colleges and universities are talking more and more about excellence—quality in programming, people, and standards. Report after national report, whether on the condition of the high schools or the colleges, has called for America's schools to reaffirm their commitment to excellence.

Quality takes on a special urgency during hard times. When resources are plentiful, high and low quality programs can exist side by side. Many colleges can afford to support both. In hard times, inadequacy is a luxury too expensive to be tolerated. Excellence becomes more than appealing rhetoric, it becomes a pragmatic necessity for colleges that want to attract serious students and financial support.

For the five colleges, this has been a very special time. All were forced to take a serious look at their situations and future directions. If there is a lesson that grows out of the experience of the five, it is that the present is a time for colleges and universities to recognize the challenges that face them and to respond to them boldly and directly. To do otherwise—to avoid the challenges or to fail to address them—only invites decline.

This is an age which places a premium on imaginative leadership, creative vision, and thoughtful action. Higher education is in a period of flux and resorting. The profession is seeking new models of excellence. As in the past, flagship institutions will emerge; some familiar and established leaders, others less well known and now developing.

The point is this. Today, institutions that know themselves and are confident of their directions have the potential to make big strides. There is greater opportunity now than in the past, the potential for achievement is higher, and the rewards for succeeding are larger. Never in recent memory, have colleges had a greater opportunity to reach for excellence.

## LESSON 2

**Sound management is essential for colleges today, but it is not enough.**

The effective and efficient marshalling of resources and people is always critical for higher education. But today with limited resources and a declining margin for error, it has become imperative.

Call it management, call it administration. It's emerging as a national preoccupation. At bookstores around the country, the shelf space for volumes on management seems to be growing arithmetically. For the first time in recent memory the national best seller list is dotted with management books—*Search for Excellence, The One Minute Manager, What They Don't Teach You at the Harvard Business School,* and the rest.

Management has become a powerful word in our culture. Increasingly it is being used as a synonym for success. One of the popular volumes on the topic promises the reader "the quickest way to increase productivity, profits, job satisfaction, and personal prosperity."

The experience of the five colleges shows that good management is essential. Each of the schools worked very hard to build the right management team. And each continues to work hard at it. Sound management requires continuing nurturance and reinforcement.

But management by itself is not enough. Management is a means, a mechanism for directing and ordering the activities of a college. Equally important are the ends of the institution, the aims the college is managing toward.

For the five colleges, a clear and workable definition of purpose or mission was the starting point for renewal. The

colleges came by their definitions in a variety of ways—the arrival of new presidents, the work of institutional task forces, the press of changing institutional realities, and the desire to preserve long standing traditions. The definitions themselves were equally varied—different populations to be served, different outcomes to be achieved, different philosophies of education, and different approaches to teaching and learning (See Appendix A).

Despite the dramatic differences, the consequences for the five colleges were the same. The first was a clear sense of institutional direction and collegiate character.

The second was a heightened accent on quality. A mission is a college's definition of excellence in aspirations, program, staffing, students, and standards. It states what a college is and hopes to become. Just as important, a mission states what a college is not. In this way, it reduces institutional atomism, dilution of basic educational values, curriculum drift, and wasted resources; all of which encourage mediocrity and have a leveling effect on institutional quality.

The third was improved management. A well defined mission dictates priorities and provides a daily tool for decision-making. It defines the relationship between program, budget, development, admissions, and other campus facilities and services. The fact is that there are many more pressing needs and appealing proposals at every college than there are money and manpower. Mission provides the best criterion for making choices and investing resources.

At the symposium, Warren Bryan Martin of the Carnegie Foundation described the typical college mission statement as "pious platitudes" to which great tribute and little attention is paid. The five colleges learned that a mission has to be something more. It has to be alive and vital. It needs to animate a college. Formulating a mission and regularly reviewing it is the largest responsibility a college board of trustees and president have. The rest is translation—programming, staffing, and supporting.

## LESSON 3

**Focusing on education is the best remedy for the challenges facing colleges and universities today.**

Of late, higher education's most pressing problems have been bodies (enrollment and retention) and bucks (fund raising and dollar saving). And the most obvious answers have been better marketing, recruiting, management, fund raising, and accounting. Or so the near avalanche of mail that crosses our desks each year from consultants and seminar planners would indicate.

All five of the colleges chose another reponse; in fact the same response. They focused on education—teaching, learning, and curriculum.

Alverno College developed a pioneering competency based curriculum. Bard chose to emphasize literacy and reasoning in a program blending classical and progressive approaches to the liberal arts. Birmingham-Southern brought together pre-professional programs and a liberal arts context. Bradford College introduced a liberal arts curriculum designed to prepare students for careers. And Scripps focused on women, careers, and the humanities and creative arts.

That the colleges selected this path is not surprising. It is the logical next step after defining institutional mission. A curriculum is no more than a mirror of a college's purpose, the way that an institution translates its mission into action.

Teaching and learning are at the heart of higher education. The challenges facing colleges and universities today can be called demography, economics, and social change. But it would be more accurate to say these are the

causes. The challenges are more fundamental. They are educationally based. Higher education is being challenged today to gear teaching and learning to a changing society in which a technological revolution is underway, social institutions are being transformed, the globe is shrinking, and civic participation is low. Higher education is being challenged to provide programs for new populations in a time when the number of older adults is increasing, the number of young people is shrinking, the number of minorities is growing, and the population is in transit. Higher education is being challenged to offer curricula that respond to changing economic realities—the death of old industries, the rise of new, a job market in transition and a turbulent economy. Higher education is being challenged to overcome public doubts about existing philosophies and pedagogies. Higher education is being challenged to offer programs that can meet the competition of newly emerging educational providers—corporations, proprietary schools, the military and more.

The best answer to each of these challenges is quality education. To respond in any other fashion is to misunderstand the nature of the collegiate enterprise. At best other answers offer only short term and partial adjustments.

The results of focusing on education for the five colleges were good. The combination of a clearly defined mission and a coherent program to carry it out made each of the colleges distinctive. A special niche was created in the educational marketplace.

And those differences attracted students. At each of the colleges, applications for admission rose, an average of 28 percent over the past five years. Retention increased similarly. It became easier to recruit and retain excellent faculty. Bradford College is a case in point. The new "Bradford Plan" curriculum increased job inquiries. The "Plan" was specifically mentioned in many of the letters of application. Despite low salaries, the new curriculum brought excellent faculty to Bradford who could not have been enticed in the past even with a tight job market.

The programs generated a sense of excitement and enthusiasm on the campuses, a feeling of common enterprise and community. It was a marvelous tonic.

Off campus the five programs translated into resources. They swelled alumni pride and in all cases increased giving,

for some rather dramatically. For instance, Birmingham-Southern increased alumni participation nearly four-fold. In most cases, the curricula provided an impetus for launching needed capital campaigns. The programs also attracted a substantial number of major grants from the nation's premier foundations. These organizations are inundated with requests for funding. It is far easier to garner their support on the basis of an exciting curricular idea than simple need. In addition, the programs produced a good deal of media coverage for the five colleges—television, radio, newspapers, and magazines—national and regional, popular and professional. And the nicest part is that each of the gains fed the others—press produced applications, students produced faculty, grants produced greater alumni giving.

And most important, better than all the rest, focusing on education enhanced the quality of the five colleges. Each has a stronger and more coherent curriculum today. The quality of teaching and learning has been enhanced.

In short, the experience of the five colleges shows that a focus on education encourages not only institutional vitality, but a budget in the black. Resources follow programs, not the other way around.

For this reason, it was thought critical for college boards of trustees to appoint presidents on the basis of education vision. Marketing skills and fund raising ability alone are not enough. Vision needs to come first. Historically, higher education's grestest leaders have been educators—presidents like Nott, Eliot, White, Gilman, Harper, Hutchins, and Aydelotte; individuals who turned great educational visions into great colleges. This is the need and this is the urgency of higher education today.

LESSON 4

## Colleges can prosper by embracing the liberal arts.

Over the past year, a number of national blue ribbon commissions have issued reports calling on colleges to reaffirm the liberal arts—*Involvement in Learning* by the National Institute of Education, *To Reclaim a Legacy* by William Bennett, and *Integrity in the College Curriculum* by the Association of American Colleges. More reports with similar injunctions are on the way.

It's an intellectually appealing recommendation for colleges; the liberal arts are their heritage and lifeblood. But it is also a frightening recommendation. More and more students are opting for purely occupational programs. Over the past decade and a half, enrollments in the liberal arts have declined by more than a third while attendance in a number of occupational fields has grown by more than half.

Some say the liberal arts have outlived their usefulness and should give way to more technically based instruction. After all, the reasoning goes, today's students are more career and materially oriented than their predecessors. They are entering a difficult job market with greater immediate opportunities for the technically trained. Each time a new blue ribbon statement is released, news reporters call the presidents of liberal arts colleges and ask why a student or parent should seek a liberal arts education? Have the liberal arts become an anachronism, an irrelevancy?

Each of the five colleges has faced this dilemma. Significantly each chose not to reject the liberal arts. In fact, all embraced them. In their discussions, the presidents probed whether their institutional successes came in spite

of that commitment or because of it. Their unanimous conclusion was that the liberal arts were a major source of their colleges' strength. They cited four reasons:

First, the liberal arts are what colleges do best. They are the foundation upon which higher education is built. The vast majority of colleges has their roots in the liberal arts. Their faculties are teachers and scholars, educated principally in the liberal arts. Their curricula for the most part are products of the liberal arts. For 350 years the mission of the American college has been preparing students, largely through the liberal arts, for life as well as jobs.

When it comes to training, colleges can rarely compete with business and industry. They can seldom afford the cutting edge technologies, the most up-to-date equipment or the staff to teach the hands-on operations in the workplace. Colleges are not trainers, nor can they ever be. They are educators. And the liberal arts—through history, staffing, programming, and resources—are the way colleges are best equipped to educate.

Second, the liberal arts are highly versatile, offering colleges endless curriculum building possibilities. The five colleges are excellent illustrations. Their visions of the liberal arts are remarkably different. There could be no agreement on a common program or a model approach to education. Philosophically, their curricula run the gamut from the thinking of Adler and Hutchins to the writings of Dewey and Whitehead, with wide variations in between. Some are more in tune with the classical emphasis of the National Endowment for the Humanities report; others are more reflective of the Association of American College statement with its temporal accent on education for living or the National Institute of Education paper with its emphasis on student development. This sort of flexibility makes the liberal arts particularly useful for responding to change—changing times, changing student populations, and changing educational needs.

Third, the liberal arts are the right education for the times. There is a large body of research on the outcomes of a liberal arts education. It shows clearly that the liberal arts raise student capacity to adapt to changing environments. They cultivate the abilities required for work and for life—critical thinking, judgment, appreciation, values, communication skills, analytic and conceptual ability. In addition,

broad general education helps to foster tolerance and historical understanding, building connections between the individual and the rest of the human race, qualities that are indispensable to survival in an interdependent world. No other form of education matches these results.

Finally, the liberal arts prepare students for a tough job market. Throughout the history of higher education, there has been an intimate bond between the liberal arts and the needs of the labor market. This was true of the medieval university a millennium ago with its curriculum based on the trivium and quadrivium. It was true of the first colonial college, almost 350 years ago, with its twelve subject classical curriculum. And it is still true today. Study after study at corporations and colleges all over this nation has produced the same conclusion: a liberal arts education spells the difference between a job and the succession of positions and the richness of life we call a career.

The Department of Labor estimates that current college students will have an average of six different jobs in their lifetimes. Narrow technical training will get them the first one with greater ease and benefits than for many liberal arts graduates, but such training offers them little mobility. Consider a recent study by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company comparing the career success of liberal arts and technical students. The company found that liberal arts graduates were almost twice as likely to achieve managerial positions as holders of business or engineering degrees. The result in the long run is that a liberal arts degree makes not only educational sense, but dollars and cents.

The conclusion of the symposium was that the liberal arts have become neither anachronistic, nor irrelevant. In fact, the experience of the five colleges demonstrates that the liberal arts can still be a formula for institutional success. It indicates further that the recommendations made by recent national reports have been and can be the basis of a strategy for institutional vitality. Leon Botstein described the challenge for colleges today as "redeeming the rhetoric of the liberal arts," making undergraduate programs as strong as the language used to describe them.

## LESSON 5

**Colleges of all types have the ability to succeed today.**

Over the past several years, the bad news about higher education has tended to capture the imagination. Yet, there are colleges and universities all across this country of every type and description that are thriving. In this regard the five colleges make an important point. By definition, they are among the most vulnerable type of institution in higher education today—small, private, tuition dependent, low endowment, liberal arts colleges. Yet they are blooming without large infusions of money or unrealistic changes in personnel, facilities, or equipment. The same can be said for many of the colleges represented on the advisory committee. And recent research by the Council for the Advancement of Private Higher Education shows that there have been 183 major institutional turnarounds in this sector alone during the past five years, colleges experiencing substantial enrollment declines that rebounded strongly. The lesson is simple—if these institutions of higher learning have the ability to thrive, then most colleges in America do, too.

# CONCLUSION

We do not offer these lessons as a panacea. There are some institutions that will follow them and grow weaker. Others will choose expediency and prosper. But of this we are certain. The lessons have the potential to improve the educational quality and financial standing of many colleges.

Our conclusion is that colleges can do well by doing what is right. The overarching theme of the symposium and the presidents' conversation was optimism—not the optimism that comes of bravado or naivete, but the optimism of experience and testing. Joel Read described the present as a time when colleges can make their own luck. The next decade will be a hard one for higher education as a whole, but each individual institution has an unprecedented opportunity for excellence, a chance to thrive. This is the fundamental lesson learned by five colleges.

# APPENDIX A

## Five Institutional Missions

**Alverno College,** Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Alverno, a college for women, places a unique emphasis on acquiring the abilities needed to put knowledge to use. Its mission is to educate women for responsible civic, professional and personal roles in a free society. It does this by an ability-based education with a curriculum offering integrated and comprehensive studies in liberal arts and career fields.

**Bard College,** Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Bard's curriculum in the liberal arts and sciences strikes a balance between the classical and progressive. It seeks to strengthen literacy and reasoning, scientific, historical, and artistic understanding and foster a spirit of rigorous inquiry and independence in undergraduate scientific research and in the fine and performing arts. The College preserves traditional undergraduate education and creates new traditions for the future, including the implementation of the early college and new designs for graduate study.

**Bradford College,** Bradford, Massachusetts

Bradford's historical commitment to the liberal arts is manifested in its new four-year curriculum, "The Bradford Plan for a Practical Liberal Arts Education." This distinctive program seeks to provide students with a comprehensive liberal education and at the same time to prepare them practically for life and work after college.

**Birmingham-Southern College,** Birmingham, Alabama

Birmingham-Southern is a private liberal arts college which is associated with the United Methodist Church. The College emphasizes strong pre-professional programs, taught within the context of the liberal arts. Begun in 1856, the Collge has received national recognition, in recent years particularly for its programs in computer science in a liberal arts setting.

**Scripps College,** Claremont, California

Scripps, a four-year college for women, offers a curriculum based on the traditional components of the liberal arts within the unique context of the Claremont Colleges Consortium. Its interdisciplinary humanities program, commitment to the career development of women, and integration of the fine arts into the academic program are all important elements of the Scripps tradition.